Who sets the agenda on student engagement?

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In 2011, a UK Government White Paper (DBIS, 2011) paved the way for universities to charge fees to a maximum of £9,000, aspiring for "more investment, greater diversity and less centralised control". This was followed in 2015 by a Green Paper (DBIS, 2015), which set out plans to launch a new Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) for the UK with ambitions to "drive social mobility by further increasing higher education (HE) participation by those from disadvantaged and under-represented groups". Both papers set out clearly the government's policymaking agenda: to create further marketisation and diversification of the sector and to ensure that students receive first-class teaching and increased value for money. The White Paper provided an opportunity for institutions to consider their role in a progressively diverse and uncertain HE sector. Institutions have been grappling with the concept of student as 'consumer' or even 'customer' since the hike in fees in 2012, becoming increasingly focused on improving levels of student satisfaction. More recently, however, engagement models have evolved to explore the idea of students as 'co-creators' and 'co-producers' working in partnership with universities, something which is a "direct challenge to consumerism" (Carey, 2013). The sector has responded to the increase in fees with significant investment in the student experience agenda, focusing especially on promoting student engagement at every level. This agenda has given rise to a very different terminology to describe the roles and responsibilities of students, often referred to as 'partners' and 'stakeholders' in their learning journey, where partnership is seen a process and not an outcome (Flint, 2015; Russell, 2015; Bryson, 2016). It is this idea of process which also connects the partnership agenda to the creation of a community of practice with a degree of informality and high connectivity (Hoadley, 2012).

The current HE policymaking agenda is driven by central government, interested in championing a wide range of factors, including, but not limited to, differentiating institutional identities, the emergence of new/alternative providers, achieving value for money, recognising excellent teaching and providing further transparency in provision. The sector is also grappling with such other external pressures as school and parental involvement in student decision-making, the contribution to improved social mobility and recognising the enhancement of students' cultural, social and economic capital. Nevertheless, with a multitude of competing agendas, the sector needs to redress the balance by answering some important questions about who sets and drives the student agenda.

It must be noted that the newly-created Office for Students has limited student representation. In responding to the current discourse on student engagement and partnership, are we merely ticking the metaphorical 'quality assurance' boxes or are we truly invested in engaging students with their educational experience, not necessarily as consumers but as engaged, scholarly citizens? Should we accept that the metrics used to measure 'excellence' and 'success' are truly the right indicators of such? If we are to engage with students as 'citizen scholars' (Arvanitakis and Hornsby, 2016), we should be acknowledging their input into the co-creation of an agenda which not only focuses on student engagement but also seeks collective improvement in the delivery of HE. The current system of measurement is fundamentally flawed and serves only to create further

competition, rather than collaboration. It does not truly value student engagement in the improvement of HE and does little to further an approach which values different institutional identities and celebrates diversity. Whilst there is a need to be mindful of perceptions about differing levels of student engagement, including interpretations and assumptions about dis-engaged and hyper-engaged stakeholders, a balanced partnership within the agenda-setting relationship must be obtained. In short, transparency and value for money cannot be achieved without engaging students themselves in a conversation about their needs and how we can work in partnership to meet them. The overall aim should be to enable students to choose the right institution and the right course for them, regardless of 'market forces' or the subjective notion of 'reputation'. If this is not achieved, then we are engaging learners in an educational system that fails to give them the stretching and dynamic experience they crave. We find students on ill-fitting courses, at ill-fitting institutions. The first TEFlympics medals have been handed out, but what happens when the lower-ranked bronze countries win gold in their field? In a year or so, we shall have 'Gold courses' delivered in 'Bronze universities' and 'Bronze courses' delivered in 'Gold universities' with even more scope for confusion and less transparency in decision-making. Without the opportunity to drive this agenda jointly, the sector is caught in a game of obfuscation. Now, more than ever, there is a need to move away from competition and embrace collaboration. We must empower students, as the citizens of tomorrow, to make meaningful contributions to society and to embrace the philosophy of learning which helps us all to solve global challenges. For many, the dual issues of Brexit and Trump are becoming increasingly more frightening and complex. There is scope for further breakdown in communication, civility and the shared agendas we were once open to discuss. The agenda appears to be set and no-one appears to be happy with it; is it time to talk about setting a new agenda on student engagement?

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